Sawant Introduces Budget Legislation Backing New Africatown Affordable Housing Project on East Yesler Way in District 3

Councilmember Sawant, News Releases, Sawant

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Africatown CEO K. Wyking Garrett says, "We need bold investments to move away from the current de facto Jim Crow Apartheid status quo in Seattle towards a new normal rooted in equity."

Sawant urges Councilmembers to stand with the Black Lives Matter movement in action by supporting funding for community-controlled affordable housing at the former Keiro Center

Councilmember Kshama Sawant (District 3, Central Seattle), chair of the Council's Sustainability and Renters Rights Committee, today (Oct. 26) introduced legislation for the City to acquire the former Keiro Center at 1601 E. Yesler Way, to be developed by Africatown Community Land Trust as affordable housing. Sawant called on the City Council to include the project and funding for it in the City's 2021 budget, which is being debated and voted on over the next four weeks.

"I applaud Africatown and community members for bringing this proposal to us last Thursday. **Africatown President and CEO K. Wyking Garrett is absolutely right to call for developing the Keiro Center**, which served the Japanese community for generations until it closed last year, as affordable housing to help push back against the racist gentrification that has been ravaging the Central District. This is a rare opportunity to use a full square block in the rapidly gentrifying Central District, to develop affordable housing to prevent displacement," Sawant said.

"**We need bold investments to move away from the current de facto Jim Crow Apartheid status quo in Seattle towards a new normal rooted in equity," Garrett said. "The former Keiro site is an unprecedented opportunity and low hanging fruit for the City to support equitable and inclusive development that mitigates the economic exclusion caused by past public and private sector policies and practices."**

Sawant added: “As District 3 Councilmember and representative of Seattle’s working people, I am proud to have been an active part of our city’s Black Lives Matter movement. Together, we have organized, marched, and rallied, demanding that the political establishment go beyond words and promises, and take tangible action to reverse racist gentrification. This is one of those actions, and it’s urgently needed,” she said.

The Central District used to be more than 70 percent Black in the 1970s; today, that figure is less than 18 percent, Sawant noted. “The economic eviction of Black households is a direct outcome of for-profit developers and big banks colluding with the city’s political establishment over the decades to systematically push Black working-class people out of Seattle’s urban core. This racist gentrification has destroyed the very fabric of the community – forcing people out of their homes, away from their friends and neighbors, their churches, grocery stores, community clinics, parks, and schools,” she said.

“That is why this new proposal is so timely. We received Africatown’s proposal Thursday evening, and over the weekend my staff drafted and submitted the legislation,” Sawant added. “I urge other City Councilmembers to sign on as co-sponsors.”

Sawant’s budget proposal would allocate $13.8 million to the Office of Housing to purchase the property, to be used as a short-term non-congregate shelter, and a long-term equitable redevelopment housing project. Funding for the project could come either by reducing the bloated police budget, or by slightly increasing the new tax on Amazon and other major corporations. The project could also be funded by restoring the $30 million Strategic Investment Fund to Address Displacement, which the Mayor promised but eliminated in her proposed budget.

Sawant’s budget proposal builds on the community movement’s victory earlier this year in securing at least $18 million/year in dedicated funding from the new Amazon tax to build affordable housing in the Central District, to help households that have been disproportionately harmed by gentrification and displacement return to the area. Sawant worked closely with Black clergy to win inclusion of the affordable housing commitment in the spending plan for the Amazon Tax legislation.

Sawant noted that hundreds of community members rallied against the sale of the Keiro Center last year to a corporate developer. “I was proud to join the protest actions at the Keiro Center, including our disruption of a board meeting where the directors were discussing the sale of this community asset. The Keiro board ultimately sold to a for-profit developer, unfortunately, but now because of that pressure from so many community activists, and the momentum from the Black Lives Matter movement, the developer appears to be willing to sell the property so that Africatown can develop it for the community,” Sawant noted.

The building is currently being utilized by Mary’s Place as an emergency shelter.

Africatown’s proposal would continue the 275-bed shelter for the time being, and in the long term develop affordable housing for households earning 30-50% of area median income (AMI).

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